



THE NATIONAL MEDAL OF ARTS

by Don Neal

A prestigious American honor, the National Medal of Arts is an award and title created by the United States Congress in 1984. It is a White House program administered in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and is the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the United States government. It is awarded to individuals or groups who "...are deserving of special recognition by reason of their outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support and availability of the arts in the United States."

Any member of the public may submit a nomination to the National Council on the Arts (NEA) for consideration. The advisory committee of the NEA then submits its slate of recommendations to the White House for the President of the United States to consider. The president makes the final decision on recipients for the award, and the NEA works with

the White House to hold a ceremony to award the medals. The medal was designed for the NEA by sculptor Robert Graham.

Several Black Americans who have been commemorated on a U.S. stamp also have been recipients of the National Medal of Arts. They are...



1985: Ralph Ellison (March 1, 1913 – April 16, 1994) was a writer, literary critic, and scholar best known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953.



1986: Marian Anderson (February 27, 1897 – April 8, 1993) was a contralto singer. She performed a wide range of music from opera to spiritual. She became the first Black American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera.



1987: Romare Bearden (September 2, 1911 – March 12, 1988) was an artist, author, and songwriter. He worked with many types of media including cartoons, oils, and collages.



1987: Ella Fitzgerald (April 25, 1917 – June 15, 1996) was a jazz singer, sometimes referred to as the "First Lady of Song," and "Queen of Jazz." She was noted for her purity of tone, impeccable diction, phrasing, timing, intonation, and a "horn-like" improvisational ability, particularly in her scat singing.



1989: Katherine Dunham (June 22, 1909 – May 21, 2006) was a dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, and social activist. She had one of the most successful dance careers of the 20th century, and directed her own dance company for many years. She has been called the "matriarch and queen mother of Black dance" noted for her innovative interpretations of ritualistic and ethnic dances.



1990: Jacob Lawrence (September 7, 1917 – June 9, 2000) was a painter known for his portrayal of Black American historical subjects and contemporary life. His did the artwork for the stamp depicting the 1964 Civil Rights Act, part of the To Form a More Perfect Union issue in 2005.



1993: Ray Charles (September 23, 1930 – June 10, 2004) was a singer, songwriter, and pianist. He is regarded as one of the most iconic and influential singers in history, and often was referred to by contemporaries as "The Genius."



1994: Celia Cruz (October 21, 1925 – July 16, 2003) was a naturalized Cuban-American singer and one of the most popular Latin artists of the 20th century. She became known internationally as the "Queen of Salsa."



1995: Gwendolyn Brooks (June 7, 1917 – December 3, 2000) was a poet, author, and teacher. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry on May 1, 1950, for *Annie Allen*, making her the first Black American to receive a Pulitzer Prize.



2000: Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was a memoirist, popular poet, and civil rights activist best known for her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and for reciting her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the first inauguration of Bill Clinton (1993).



2001: The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, a modern dance company and school, named after Alvin Ailey, Jr. (January 5, 1931 – December 1, 1989) who was a dancer, director, choreographer, and activist.

2012: Ernest J. Gaines (January 15, 1933 – November 5, 2019) was an author and teacher whose works, including *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, have been taught in college classrooms and made into TV movies.

